

Nat J. Colletta. *American Schools for the Natives of Ponape: A Study of Education and Culture Change in Micronesia.* Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, 1980. Paper. Pp. xiv, 181, illustrations, appendices, index. \$10.00.

Nat Colletta has written a critique of elementary and secondary education on the island of Ponape in the US Trust Territory of Micronesia. The author is a former Peace Corps Volunteer, who first served as a teacher in the educational system, and later returned as a graduate student to conduct research on the schools for his doctoral dissertation. He regards the American educational system in the islands as, on balance, a failure. This opinion is largely shared by the writer of the foreword, Richard King of the University of Victoria, who had also served at an earlier period as an American educator on Ponape.

The schools have produced generations of graduates, many of whom are alienated from their traditional culture and at the same time are often poorly equipped to participate in the modern world. The educational system is expensive and requires outside support (US funds) to keep it going. The outside funding has tended to keep it beyond effective local control, in spite of the official policy of turning over more and more government functions to Micronesians. Moreover, while in traditional Ponapean society young people have been integrated in moderate numbers into a hierarchical family and community in which they are gradually drawn into adult responsibilities, in the modern schools--especially in the high school--young people are removed from home and assembled in large groups poorly controlled by their teachers. Strong peer groups develop, which after graduation resist control by the traditional authorities, and have at the same time little socially useful direction of their own. Colletta further criticizes the schools for being elitist in nature, since students are graded on their work, and access to higher education is restricted to those who receive good enough grades, thus depriving the rest of the young people of further education.

Colletta has a number of suggestions for improving the educational system. For one, he believes that more local control is desirable. He also proposes that a broader conception of education is needed which would emphasize learning outside formal classrooms in on-the-job training and adult education on current issues. He proposes educational efforts where possible in existing groups in the society, such as "women's organizations, farmer's clubs, youth groups," etc. (p. 148). He also cites favorably the example of schools in various developing socialist countries which are partly self-supporting through the productive labor of the students, a system

which was also briefly in effect on Ponape under the American regime, as he notes.

Obviously, Colletta is thoroughly familiar with public schools on Ponape and their history. His criticisms and proposals strike me as often very pertinent and always at least plausible. With the approach of independence for Micronesia, the time seems ripe for a thorough reconsideration of the educational system in all the islands, including Ponape. The educational authorities would do well to listen to Colletta and think hard about what he has written in this book.

I suggest, however, that there are at least two issues which he could usefully have considered further. These are individualism and elitism. According to popular Western (especially American) stereotypes, which Colletta seems at times to share, individualism is good and elitism is bad. I suggest this assignment of values is probably maladaptive for most other cultures, including Ponape.

US educators typically consider it their duty to identify the unique potential of each student and to develop this as far as possible. The needs of the society for individuals with certain special training come in for some consideration, in that it is assumed that so far no real school system has supplied all the varied education its students need and "deserve," and that with limited resources it is sometimes necessary to cater more to the needs of students interested in certain specialties urgently needed by the society, e.g., physicians, nurses, engineers. However, there is a feeling that such favoring of students with certain interests over others is basically unfair, and that as soon as sufficient funds can be obtained, each student should be provided with the unique education suited to his unique potential, be it great or trivial, socially useful or useless, so long as it is not specifically and intentionally antisocial.

Colletta admits that individualism has characterized the American schools for Ponapeans (e.g., p. 94) and recommends that the curriculum should be redesigned to meet village needs (p. 150), but it is my feeling that this position deserves much more attention than he has given it in this book. American educators tend to assume that for each individual there is one and only one ideal life's work, and that in an ideal society the school system should identify this career for each child and get him off to a good start, regardless of the costs to society or its changing needs for different kinds of labor. Moreover, it is assumed that the child has a right to this special education, and that he owes nothing to the society for it during it or afterwards, except to pay taxes and avoid harming others as a competent adult. This is a view which could have arisen only in a society of abundance--in fact, only in a social class of abundance, since even our

own society does not actually have sufficient resources to offer such lavish education to children of all social strata.

Even in a society of abundance, this extreme individualistic principle is highly questionable. Individuals must eventually exercise their training in a real society with a real economy and real needs. If the individual's training is to be useful to him, there must be a suitable position where he can make use of his training after graduation. Even in a society of abundance, some jobs are needed in much greater numbers than others to keep the economy going.

On the contrary, in developing societies such as Ponape and Micronesia, which have limited resources, limited economic possibilities, and severe problems of transportation and communication, it is especially important to consider how many of what kinds of specialists the society is likely to need, and to organize the educational system accordingly. If this means that a potential atomic physicist ends up as a fisherman or pig farmer, so be it. A Ponapean atomic physicist will never have the facilities to work effectively on his home island. While he might succeed in getting a suitable job in the United States, we already have enough potential atomic physicists here, and there is no need to devote limited societal resources to the education of a Ponapean atomic physicist. (Of course, the Ponapean public needs general information about such issues as the advantages and dangers of nuclear power plants, the possible latent effects of the atomic bomb tests upwind of Ponape on Eniwetok in the 1950s, etc., but these are matters of general education in the modern world and do not require the production of any Ponapean Ph.D. in atomic physics.)

Advocates of extreme individualism ignore the great adaptability of the normal healthy human child and his multiple potentialities. Certainly there are important individual differences in ability and interest dependent on both heredity and early experience, and it is in the interest of the society to take these into account in providing education and jobs for its members. It is inescapable that some education and jobs will have more prestige than others, and it is only reasonable that the assignment of these choice jobs, like all others, should be based on ability and interest. This prospect seems to be grudgingly recognized by Colletta, but he seems to dislike it because it implies "elitism." He recognizes, for instance (p. 151), a continuing need for a "deemphasized, but still important secondary and tertiary education system," but adds, "the equitable selection of the participants at varying levels of education and training will be highly problematic," and leaves the matter there. I presume he is in a quandary because he has repeatedly attacked "elitism" and competition in the Ponapean schools as American introductions, but is forced to acknowl-

edge that they will have their place even in an ideal reformed school system.

A certain kind of elitism and competition within limits is surely inevitable and useful in a complex society, even one as small as modern Ponape. Moreover, elitism and competition, within certain conventions, are in fact characteristic of traditional Ponapean society: they are not "corruptions" introduced by the modern school system. At Ponapean feasts, food is distributed in order of rank and the title of each recipient is called out with his share of food. Age and matrilineal descent play a part in determining a man's title, but every Ponapean knows that an individual's feast contributions and public service can greatly help a man achieve high title, regardless of his age or ancestry. The most beautiful smiles have ever seen on Ponapean faces have been in response to congratulations for promotion to a new title. Of course, in such a system there are losers as well as winners. The losers grumble, but they generally survive nevertheless and continue their effective participation in the society even after someone else has been awarded the title they had been hoping for.

It is true, as Colletta points out, that Ponapeans are trained to be modest verbally and to feign ignorance in public even when they know perfectly well something a little esoteric. This makes necessary a revision of American classroom techniques. A chorus response is preferable to answers by individual students. Students can still be evaluated on the basis of their written work. Brief individual tutorial sessions held in an office away from the rest of the class would also be helpful, though time-consuming. Perhaps older students could become involved in these.

Colletta is right in calling for substantial reform of the Ponapean educational system, and in asking more specifically for trials of various forms of adult education, for the reduction of the number of students in the upper levels of the schools, for an attempt to make the remaining schools more nearly self-supporting or partly supported by parents, for adapting the school schedules to the existing annual work cycle, etc. At the same time, we may wonder how much the schools are responsible by themselves for the generation conflict and other social problems of modern society. Probably culture contact usually causes some social disruption in the politically and economically weaker society, and the best educational system could at the most simply alleviate this somewhat. Even with educational reform, Ponapeans would still be subject to the disruptive effects of tourists, economic entrepreneurs, missionaries, anthropologists, bureaucrats, and other visitors in person, as well as all sorts of information from the outside world arriving in the form of radio broadcasts, motion

pictures, printed matter, and recently, television. These visitors and messages often have positive effects as well, but certainly they are often inconsistent with traditional Ponapean culture, as well as with each other, and to that extent can be regarded as disruptive. Moreover, this disruption is probably more than simply a manner of speaking about social change: it is probably reflected in a rising crime rate, alcoholism, psychosomatic disease, a decline in the quality of the diet, economic disorganization, lowered worker productivity, and the like. But the very diversity of outside influences helps prevent any one influence from becoming excessively dominant, and may leave room for positive aspects of the traditional culture to survive and flourish, at the same time permitting some negative aspects to be replaced by foreign innovations.

Probably some readers will question the right of Colletta or this reviewer to make pronouncements on the future of Ponapean education as independence draws near. But as long as the United States continues to finance the government and educational system of Ponape, American citizens can argue that they have not only a right but an obligation to be concerned with the uses of the funds supplied. Of course, most Americans lack enough knowledge of Ponapean education to raise useful questions about it. Nat Colletta possesses such knowledge. It would be fortunate if those who control the future of Ponapean education would read Colletta and ponder his ideas well as an aid to making the decisions which they must make.

J. L. Fischer
Department of Anthropology
Tulane University
New Orleans, Louisiana